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## ENGLISH LITERATURE COURSES IN THE SMALL COLLEGE

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It is necessary for the courses in English literature to meet the needs of two classes or types of students: those who take only enough English to meet the requirements for graduation, and those who major in the department. The needs of these two classes, whether or not the students themselves are conscious of it, are widely different. Those who take only sufficient work in English to satisfy the group requirements will, almost invariably, elect general courses in well-known periods and men—the so-called standard or popular courses. Shakespeare and Victorian Poetry, by common consent, stand first in this class. Of course, here as everywhere, the personality of the instructor has much to do in popularizing his work, but these courses persist as the staples.

The student who takes only one or two English courses as an undergraduate, and those because he needs the credit, will not be seriously handicapped if he finds in the curriculum only a few courses in the well-known periods of literature, but that student who majors in English with a view to teaching or to graduate study is at an obvious disadvantage if he is so limited in choice of work. How many weary hours of poring over Ryland's *Outlines*, to place men never heard of or to gain an idea of unfamiliar periods and ages, would be saved the graduate student if he had had, as an undergraduate, a thorough and systematic course in literature.<sup>1</sup> For this class of students, then, the ideal aim of the English department should be nothing less than the offering of courses affording an intimate acquaintance with English literature in its entirety—comparatively unknown ages and writers as well as great periods

<sup>1</sup> It is not presumed that all those who major in English will become teachers either immediately or after a period of graduate study, although this is true in a majority of instances. These students are cited because the shortcomings of the English department are more noticeable in their cases.

and men. This cannot be had through the "Survey Course" commonly required in the Freshman or Sophomore year, but must be gained through a logical sequence of individual courses. The universal absence of such a comprehensive course is immediately apparent upon an investigation of actual conditions. The results of such an investigation, in which the English departments of fifty representative small colleges were measured by the standard of quantitative thoroughness, are graphically set forth in the accompanying table.

It will be proper at this point to explain the methods used. The institutions are representative small colleges. The list includes the best-known colleges in the United States; twenty-one of them are on the Carnegie Foundation. Geographically they are well distributed, twenty-one being in the states east of Ohio, twenty-three in the North Central States, and the remaining six west of the Mississippi River. The term "small" is applied to the college having fewer than five hundred students.

The division into courses is that usually followed in histories of literature and is based upon (1) chronology and (2) the literary type. For all practical purposes the division is exhaustive. Chronologically it covers the field from Chaucer to the present day. The outline of types is sufficiently inclusive. Only one other course—the Essay—has any claim to a place in the classification. But because it was so seldom encountered, and, when found, covered material included in other courses, it was omitted. American Literature is the only course not English in the strictest sense, and yet it must, of necessity, be a part of the English work.

The tabulation of courses leaned always to the side of liberality. If any course, however restricted, was offered in a certain period, that period was checked off. Thus a very limited course has the same importance in the table as attaches to a more comprehensive course. For instance, a course in Tennyson is listed as Victorian Poetry; one in Pope as Eighteenth Century; one in Milton or Dryden as Seventeenth Century. The justification of such an arrangement is twofold: (1) these limited and curtailed courses give the student more or less insight into the literature of that particular period, and (2) they indicate that the college does not wholly ignore these fields of literature.

TABLE I

College	Fourteenth Century	Sixteenth Century	Shakespeare	Seventeenth Century	Eighteenth Century	Romantic Poetry	Nineteenth- Century Prose	Victorian Poetry	Drama	Novel	Criticism	Versification	American Literature
A <sub>1</sub> .....			X			X		X		X			
*A <sub>2</sub> .....	X		X			X	X	X			X		X
*A <sub>3</sub> .....	X	X	X					X	X	X			
B <sub>1</sub> .....				X			X	X	X		X		
*B <sub>2</sub> .....	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			
*B <sub>3</sub> .....	X		X				X	X		X		X	
*B <sub>4</sub> .....			X		X		X	X	X	X			X
*B <sub>5</sub> .....	X		X				X	X			X		
*B <sub>6</sub> .....			X	X				X	X				X
*C <sub>1</sub> .....			X	X		X		X	X	X			X
*C <sub>2</sub> .....			X			X		X	X	X			X
*C <sub>3</sub> .....			X			X		X	X		X		X
C <sub>4</sub> .....			X					X	X	X			
*D <sub>1</sub> .....	X		X			X	X	X	X	X	X		X
D <sub>2</sub> .....			X									X	
F <sub>1</sub> .....					X			X	X	X			
*G <sub>1</sub> .....	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
*G <sub>2</sub> .....			X	X	X		X	X	X				X
*G <sub>3</sub> .....	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
H <sub>1</sub> .....			X		X		X		X				
*H <sub>2</sub> .....	X		X	X			X	X		X		X	X
H <sub>3</sub> .....			X			X		X					
*H <sub>4</sub> .....			X	X	X		X	X		X		X	X
*I <sub>1</sub> .....	X		X			X		X	X			X	X
*I <sub>2</sub> .....			X	X		X				X		X	X
*K <sub>1</sub> .....			X			X		X		X		X	X
*L <sub>1</sub> .....		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			
*L <sub>2</sub> .....	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
*L <sub>3</sub> .....	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X				
*M <sub>1</sub> .....	X							X	X	X	X		X
*M <sub>2</sub> .....	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X			X
M <sub>3</sub> .....			X								X		
*M <sub>4</sub> .....	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X
*M <sub>5</sub> .....		X	X		X	X	X	X					
M <sub>6</sub> .....	X		X	X					X		X		
*N <sub>1</sub> .....	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X			X
*N <sub>2</sub> .....			X			X			X	X			
*O <sub>1</sub> .....			X		X	X	X	X		X	X		X
*O <sub>2</sub> .....	X			X		X		X	X	X			X
*R <sub>1</sub> .....			X		X	X		X	X				
*S <sub>1</sub> .....	X						X	X	X	X	X		X
*T <sub>1</sub> .....	X		X						X	X	X		X
*T <sub>2</sub> .....	X		X	X					X			X	X
U <sub>1</sub> .....	X		X			X		X	X	X	X		
W <sub>1</sub> .....	X		X			X			X				
*W <sub>2</sub> .....	X		X		X		X		X	X	X		X
*W <sub>3</sub> .....	X		X		X		X	X	X			X	X
*W <sub>4</sub> .....			X				X	X	X	X	X		X
*W <sub>5</sub> .....	X		X		X	X	X	X	X			X	
*W <sub>6</sub> .....	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
50	27	8	46	20	19	30	26	44	30	33	24	10	37

\*Colleges are listed alphabetically. Those marked with an asterisk (\*) catalogue all the English courses ever offered, while those not so marked catalogue only the courses offered this year.

That any study based wholly on catalogues cannot be absolutely true to actual conditions in the colleges represented will be patent to anyone familiar with college administration. However, it is as fair to one institution as to another if all the information be taken from the bulletins.<sup>1</sup> There is, however, one point of importance for this study which must be noted.

It is not presumed that all the courses ever offered in English are listed in each catalogue. That this is true in a large proportion<sup>2</sup> (78 per cent to be exact) is evidenced by the fact that certain courses are designated variously as "Omitted 1913-14," "Rotates with Course x," etc. In such cases an examination of catalogues for two or more years back failed to reveal any change in the scheduled offerings of the English department. This would seem to indicate that the plan here used is approximately three-fourths correct. But it is more nearly accurate than that. Suppose the eleven institutions (22 per cent) not cataloguing all their courses have listed only those to be offered this year, and that next year they will present certain other courses in place of some or all of those now offered. It is not at all probable that this investigation would have struck the year in which they all omit the same courses, Fourteenth Century and Eighteenth Century, for instance, and all offer the same courses, say Drama and Seventeenth Century.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is fair to assume that a just balance has been struck, that one college which omits Shakespeare and offers Nineteenth-Century Prose is complemented by another which omits Nineteenth-Century Prose and offers Shakespeare. That is to say, the figures in this table represent, as accurately as it is possible to do, the proportion of institutions actually offering the various courses. There is perhaps no college in the land which does not offer a course in Shakespeare with greater or less frequency. Only four of the institutions listed do not catalogue such a course. Of these four not one has catalogued all the courses ever offered. If

<sup>1</sup> Without exception the catalogues containing announcements of courses for 1913-14 were used.

<sup>2</sup> See Table I, and footnote.

<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact there is but one course which all the colleges in question omit this year, and that is Sixteenth Century.

four were added to the sum total of each course (making Shakespeare fifty, or 100 per cent) the table would, perhaps, be absolutely accurate for this one course, but it might be no more nearly accurate for the other courses than as it stands now, for those institutions which list only the courses offered for the current year would more than likely omit something now catalogued in order to include Shakespeare. Therefore, lest violence be done to the table as a whole, let us take it as it stands. It will, at any rate, afford a sound basis for generalization.

To bring more definitely before the reader the relative number of institutions offering the various courses, they may be arranged in the order of their decreasing popularity.

TABLE II

	Offered by	Percentage
Shakespeare.....	46 colleges	92
Victorian Poetry.....	44	88
American Literature.....	37	74
Novel.....	33	66
Drama.....	30	60
Romantic Poetry.....	30	60
Fourteenth Century.....	27	54
Nineteenth-Century Prose.....	26	52
Criticism.....	24	48
Seventeenth Century.....	20	40
Eighteenth Century.....	19	38
Versification.....	10	20
Sixteenth Century.....	8	16

For the purposes of our study the courses in this table may be divided into three groups. In the first group are three courses offered by more than three-fourths of the colleges (approximately speaking); in the second, five offered by less than three-fourths and more than half; and in the third, five offered by fewer than half. It will be instructive to note just what courses constitute each of these groups.

It is altogether fitting and proper that Shakespeare should stand first in the list, and reasons for it are too obvious to require statement. Why Victorian Poetry and American Literature, rather than any other courses, should finish out this first group may

be due to a number of causes. The facts that the Victorian age is barely past, that its poetry is thoroughly "modern," and that most study of it is "appreciative" rather than "critical" undoubtedly make definite appeal to the average college student. If the presence of American Literature cannot be accounted for on the same grounds, "national spirit," with its vaguely defined influence, may have something to do with the frequency with which the single course in this subject is offered. Whether or not it is possible to tell just why, the fact remains that Shakespeare, Victorian Poetry, and American Literature are the great popular<sup>1</sup> English courses. Where the work of a department is all in the hands of one man, these are the courses commonly relied upon for literature. In the larger departments these are the courses to be repeated year after year, while others are offered at greater or less intervals.

At the other end of the scale is a group of five courses offered by fewer than half of the institutions examined. These are the most unpopular, or the least popular, courses. It is by no means easy to give good and sufficient reason for their position. On first thought one might say that any course so infrequently offered as to be classed in this group must have some inherent fault or difficulty. This may possibly be true with regard to such type courses as Criticism and Versification. Yet even these, technical as they may seem, can be made interesting and instructive for undergraduates. But an intrinsic fault in a literature course with Spenser, Milton, or Dr. Johnson as its central figure, is farther to seek. Perhaps part of the reason for the standing of these courses may be found in the attitude of students and instructors toward them.

Students have been heard to remark apropos of these subjects: "Spenser's language is difficult and his allegory involved"; "Milton is didactic and religious"; "Eighteenth-century literature is conventional and classical." But what do these stereotyped judgments usually mean? Simply that the students are repeating what they have read in a history of literature or what someone has said in lectures in the Survey Course. These chance opinions will

<sup>1</sup> The criterion of popularity, as the word is used in this paper, is the frequency with which a course is offered.

never be standardized until the students form a first-hand acquaintance with the literature itself. And they can never do this unless courses are offered in the fields in question.<sup>1</sup> However true it may be that students elect courses in generally familiar periods, it does not follow that they would not elect a course in Sixteenth Century or Eighteenth Century if opportunity were given them.

Then there arises a question from the other side. Why do so few instructors offer these courses? Perhaps the teacher himself is not familiar with the field, although this condition is met with infrequently in the college. It may be that he has allowed the fate of a course to be determined by its popularity with the students. If so, he is encouraging them in a vitiating indulgence of the elective system and is himself following the lines of least resistance. Perhaps, and this conjecture will strike nearly every man in the small college, perhaps he is simply overworked, and finding it necessary to omit much, has left out these courses as least worth while. However this may be, a glance down the columns under these courses in Table I shows that they are rarely offered.

Of the remaining courses it is not necessary to say much. This middle group, ranging from 52 per cent to 66 per cent, and comprising Novel, Romantic Poetry, Drama, Fourteenth Century, and Nineteenth-Century Prose, is, like the great middle class everywhere, average. It represents the courses that the majority of our colleges offer with fair regularity and it is the least sound basis for generalization. To ignore this group entirely is to affect in no way the validity of the table as a whole. At either extreme are groups widely separated—on the one hand three courses offered by practically every college, and on the other, five offered by a very few. The startling revelation is that, with the exception of Chaucer and Shakespeare, practically no literature courses prior to the nineteenth century are offered in the colleges of the United States. Is it possible to put into the curriculum of the small college all of the courses now commonly omitted and still retain those at present included?

If an affirmative answer to this question is possible, it must involve a series of courses covering the whole range of English

<sup>1</sup> It is noticeable that not a single institution offers all the courses in this last group. See Table I.



literature. That such a course would be of value to one class of students to which the English department must minister without in any way inconveniencing the other class has already been pointed out. That no college is now offering such a course is evident from a glance at Table I.<sup>1</sup> But, granting that such a series is desirable, is it possible? Is not the capacity of the department already overtaxed? It is no state secret that the average professor in the small college has from one to five courses each year in addition to his classes in literature. Some subjects gathered at random are: Advanced Composition, Literary Study of the Bible, Short Story, Word Study, Teachers' Course. It seems almost ridiculous to suggest that more courses be heaped upon the man who already bears this burden. Mere physical limitations, if none other, would preclude such a step. But the solution of the difficulty is not in addition but in rearrangement. The key to the solution is *system*.

The first step in the system is the outlining of a series of courses covering the whole field of literature. The divisions already used in the tables seem to be those into which the field naturally falls. Then there must be a distribution of time among these courses which will show an intelligent comprehension of their relative value and importance. Although only the first of these considerations concerns us here, they should both be arranged with a view to the complete rotation of the series within a period of three years, thus covering the whole range of the material during the life of one generation or class of students.<sup>2</sup> The next question is that concerning the method of rotation. What combination of courses should be offered during any one year? It is neither possible nor desirable to lay down hard-and-fast rules here, although it is impossible to emphasize sufficiently the general characteristics that should be pointed out without seeming dictatorial. The following statements are made, however, as suggestions and not as laws.

<sup>1</sup> The nearest approach to it is B2, which includes all the courses up to the types. L2, L3, M2, M4, and M5 omit Sixteenth Century, Nineteenth-Century Prose, Eighteenth Century, Sixteenth Century, and Fourteenth Century, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> It is taken for granted that no student below the Sophomore year is admitted to the literature courses. A general survey course is extremely beneficial as a foundation.

Variety is a spice of intellectual as well as of physical life. It is advisable to offer courses covering different types and periods of literature. This may be illustrated from a negative point of view. That college which offers for 1913-14 courses in Shakespeare, Drama, and Novel presents very little variation in material. The student who wishes to enrol for two English courses has only one combination which takes him into two entirely different realms—Shakespeare and Novel. Both other combinations involve repetition to a greater or less extent. Shakespeare and Drama must necessarily overlap. Any course in Shakespeare is incomplete if it does not take into consideration the dramaturgic qualities of the poet, and a course in Drama is but half a course if Shakespeare be omitted. The combination of Drama and Novel affords different material but both courses are historical and involve wide reading in a type of literature. Likewise that institution which offers for this year courses in Victorian Poetry, Romantic Poetry, and Nineteenth-Century Prose is at fault when judged by the standard of variety. The obvious mistake here is too great concentration in one period. Now it may be argued that either one of these combinations will be vastly beneficial to the student in giving him all of the literature of one type or one period at the same time. Granted that this may hold for a very limited number of students. But since these courses are not being outlined for the graduate school and because students of all ranks and of various degrees of preparedness must be borne in mind, the greater the variety of courses the greater the possible number of different students reached.

Leaving negative arguments aside and assuming again the dictatorial attitude that is by no means the writer's spirit, the whole matter may be summed up in opposites thus: offer something in prose and something in poetry; something ancient and something modern; a course in the type and a course in the period. This does not necessitate half a dozen different courses at the same time, for two or more characteristics may be included in the same course. It seems safe to assume that each teacher can offer three literature courses each semester and still have time for rhetoric, Bible, etc. There are many satisfactory combinations

based on this principle. Take by way of illustration Shakespeare, Novel, and Eighteenth Century; or Chaucer, Victorian Poetry, and Drama. But when all is said, the grouping of courses in the series must, for the highest efficiency, be left entirely to the individual instructor. However, it will add concreteness to what has no doubt seemed to some to be a theoretical treatment of a utopian dream, to close this paper with an outline of the rotation series which is working out successfully in practice here.

TABLE III

1	2	3
Shakespeare Eighteenth Century Criticism Versification	Victorian Poetry Sixteenth Century Seventeenth Century Drama Novel	American Literature Fourteenth Century Romantic Poetry Nineteenth-Century Prose

The groups rotate in the order in which they are numbered. The hours are so apportioned that the courses in groups 1 and 2 represent a total of sixteen semester hours each, and in group 3, fifteen hours. This necessitates the teaching of but eight hours of literature each semester. The plan here outlined was put into commission before the study of conditions presented in this paper was begun and it is not the result of this study but the inspiration for it. But the working experience with the plan and the results of the investigation tally very closely.

The balancing of the very popular and the comparatively unpopular courses within the same year's work is shown by a comparison of Table III with Table II. But perhaps the most significant parallelism is that between the enrolment figures for the courses and the percentage column in Table II. In general, the enrolment varies as the percentage. At least this is true within the broader confines of the three groups designated by the spacing in Table II. The actual variation in enrolment ranges from five in Eighteenth Century to twenty-five in Victorian Poetry.

Is it worth while to offer a course for the five students who really want it, or should the work be wholly confined to the more popular courses?